LIGHTHOUSE
INTERNATIONAL

When Your Partner Becomes Visually Impaired ...

Helpful Insights and Tips for Coping

by Carol J. Sussman-Skalka, CSW, MBA

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Firsthand feedback about the value of support groups

"The group is a lifesaver. What we discuss really helps ... coming up with some of the solutions to some of the problems."

"Being in this group makes you think about what you're doing and where you're going. We can help and learn from each other."

"Hearing the concerns of others, talking about the guilt — just knowing that other people have the same concerns, same anxieties, and knowing you are not alone is helpful."

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First Steps

When your spouse or partner becomes visually impaired, both of you are likely to feel overwhelmed. You also may experience a range of feelings, from sadness to guilt, and there are many day-to-day adjustments to make. It's hard to know where to begin — or how to access information about vision conditions, treatment options, help and resources.

Vision rehabilitation services — which include techniques for accomplishing daily tasks and resuming leisure activities, as well as emotional support — can make an important difference in the lives of people with vision loss, particularly in their ability to regain independence. Encouragement from family and friends also can be vital in supporting their participation in these training programs.

While you can play a key role during the rehabilitation process, you undoubtedly have many adjustments and concerns of your own. You may find yourself putting aside your feelings and needs to focus on helping your partner cope. Yet, in many cases, you may feel alone and at a loss about what to do or how to help. As one couple shared, "Vision loss happened to us." You also can benefit from programs to better understand your situation, get support for your own emotional needs, and learn about relevant resources and services. Although your specific concerns may differ based on the extent of your partner's vision loss — and how long you've been dealing with it — you have many common issues with other sighted partners.

Some of the most frequently expressed concerns and feelings are discussed on the following pages. They include: understanding what your partner can see and do, communicating successfully, relating to family and friends, dealing with independence and dependence issues, appreciating the benefits of vision rehabilitation and handling stress. We hope that this resource will provide support and information to help you cope better, and will, in turn, create a more positive quality of life for both you and your partner.

Share Your Feelings: You're Not Alone

When your partner becomes visually impaired, you may experience many different emotions, including fear, guilt, anger and frustration. These feelings can be hard to admit or accept, because they are commonly perceived as negative. It may help to keep in mind that feelings are neither right nor wrong. However, feelings can get in the way of your relationship with your partner if they are not recognized or understood.

Guilt

One of the most commonly expressed emotions, guilt can appear in many forms. It may drive you to take on unwanted responsibilities. As one partner reluctantly admitted, "I don't like reading financial statements, but I do it because I feel guilty." Others experience guilt when they forget that their partners can't see things or expect that they should be able to see something because they saw it before. You also may feel guilty about taking time for yourself. And guilt may arise when you can't meet an immediate need or have to refuse a request. One wife said poignantly, "If I can't take him somewhere, I feel guilty because he depends on me to get out."

"If I can't take him somewhere, I feel guilty because he depends on me to get out."

Remember that you're not alone. Your partner probably feels guilt as well — most likely about the additional burdens and responsibilities being placed on you.

It is interesting to note that guilt is defined as remorse for doing something wrong. Therefore, people may say they feel guilty, when actually they are experiencing regret, wishing that the situation in which they find themselves was different (Schmall et al., 2000). Talking with your partner about "guilt" may bring some relief. By learning that you both have similar emotions, you can each develop a better appreciation for the other's position.

Fear

Fear, another frequently expressed feeling, often stems from wondering whether vision loss will get worse: "Will my partner become totally blind?" You also may fear for your partner's safety while performing tasks such as cooking, or getting around at home or in the community: "Can my wife be left alone?" Inevitably, there are questions about the future: "What happens if I become disabled or die? How will my spouse manage?" This issue is particularly difficult when your partner has other conditions aside from vision impairment, such as physical limitations or memory problems. While there are no easy answers, encouraging as much independence as possible, and talking about alternatives for future living arrangements, can be good first steps.

"I know if he could see to do it, he would do it himself."

Frustration

Frustration is common, particularly when you're trying to figure out when to offer help — and how much. It's hard to encourage someone to exercise his/her independence if there is reluctance to try new techniques. You may do more for your partner than you think you should due to safety concerns. Others admit that they sometimes find it faster and easier "to get the job done," rather than let partners do it themselves. But keep in mind that taking over can affect your partner's progress toward independence, causing feelings of uselessness and loss of control. Further, if you "take over," you may feel even more frustrated and angry, as you're now managing even more responsibilities that may not be necessary.

Anger

Many people reluctantly admit feeling angry about the whole situation. Like you, they struggle with their own loss of independence, as they take their partners everywhere or adjust their schedules to meet their needs. You may feel irritated by having to stop what you're doing to meet a request, and then feel badly about your reaction. One woman stated, "I know if he could see to do it, he would do it himself." Resentment also arises when you feel that your partner could be more active and independent, or if you're not getting much-needed time for yourself. As one partner shared, "I have a life, but it's not my own."

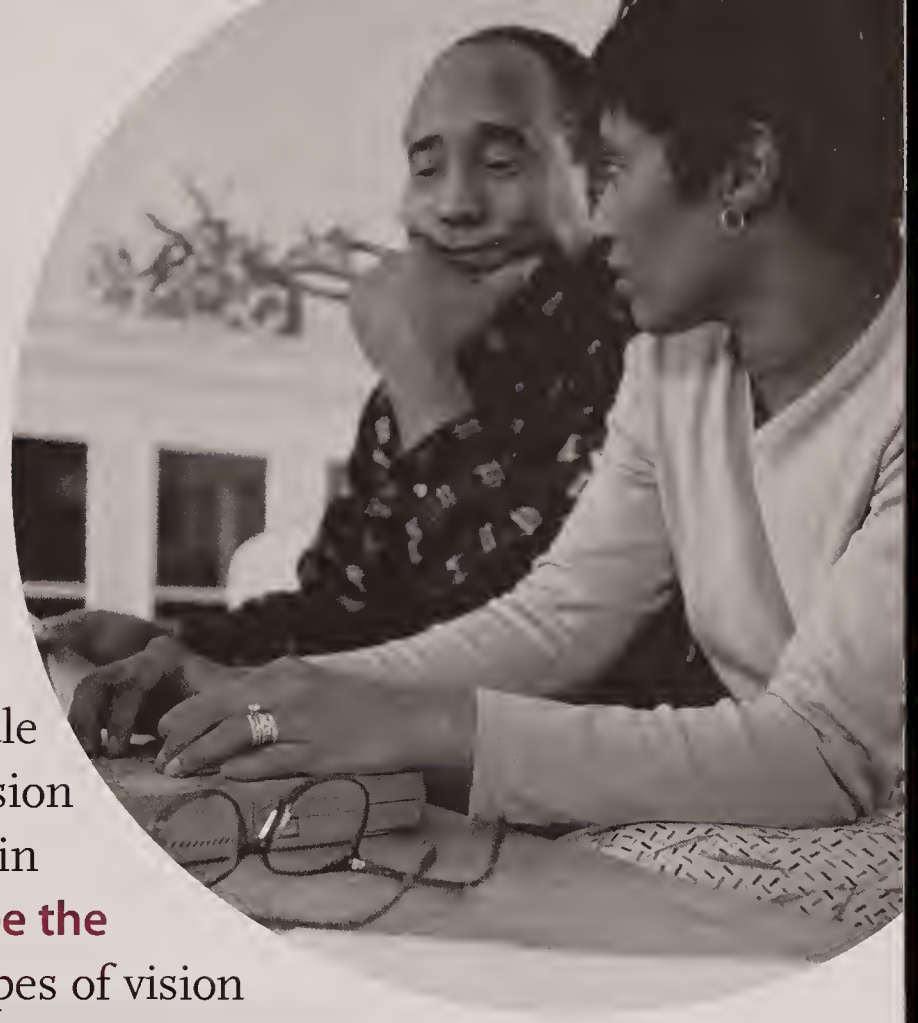
Sadness

Feeling sad — even depressed — especially at the beginning, is common for both people in the relationship. While counseling often is available for the person experiencing vision loss, you, too, can benefit from the same kind of support. As one sighted partner reported, "There's a tremendous, overwhelming sadness. It's a loss of plans and a loss of what you thought [retirement] would be." Another shared, "I was so worried about his being depressed, that I couldn't [let myself] get depressed, but I felt I needed therapy." Sighted partners who sought professional counseling found it very helpful to acknowledge, and validate, their feelings.

"Sometimes, you think you're alone, but being in this group, you find that many people have the same problems and feelings you do."

It may not be easy for you to talk about emotional issues with your partner. As one spouse shared, "I keep everything inside and that is not good for me." As your partner struggles with the adjustment to life with impaired vision, he/she may not always recognize the impact it has on you. At the same time, you may not want to add to that burden by sharing your own feelings. However, those who attended partner support groups found this outlet to be incredibly helpful. "Sometimes, you think you're alone, but being in this group, you find that many people have the same problems and feelings you do." **Sharing with others who are in the same situation can ease some of the negative feelings and allow couples to more fully enjoy their life together.** As one man explained, "Being able to define my feelings better has made it easier for me to talk to my wife about them." To locate a support group in your area, call Lighthouse International's toll-free Information & Resource Service: **(800) 829-0500**, or E-mail: **info@lighthouse.org.**

Understanding What Your Partner Can See and Do



If your partner's vision impairment developed recently or is progressive, it's hard to get a handle on what he/she can and cannot see, and how vision loss affects what can and cannot be done. When in doubt, ask! **All people with vision loss do not see the same.** Different eye conditions cause different types of vision impairment, and there are varying day-to-day consequences of each condition. For example, a person with macular degeneration may be able to move around comfortably using peripheral (side) vision, but may have difficulty recognizing faces or reading. A lack of information can create confusion and misunderstanding for family members and friends when your partner can do some things but not others. As one woman said, "I didn't realize how little he could see. I'd get annoyed if he couldn't find something because he was functioning so well in other ways."

During support group meetings, many found it helpful to experience what their partners see through the use of vision simulator glasses, which approximate different vision conditions as well as blindness. While wearing simulator glasses, participants tried different tasks like writing a check or reading a newspaper. These experiences allowed them to better appreciate the frustrations of managing everyday activities. Afterward, one person noted, "Now I understand how sometimes he can get a glass of water off the table, and sometimes he can't." For information about vision simulators, call **(800) 829-0500**.

Sighted partners also had the opportunity to use different optical devices, such as high-powered magnifiers, which gave them a firsthand view of the challenges involved in learning to use them, and an understanding of what these devices can and cannot do. One man admitted, "It's very tedious to use these devices — they're frustrating."

During vision simulation activities, sighted partners experienced a range of emotions — including sadness, frustration, guilt and fear. One participant commented, "It's scary to look at the world through this perception." But the experience also provided a starting point for talking with their partners about the impact of vision loss — to learn more details about the effects of their conditions, such as how lighting affects them, which colors improve contrast or which print size is most accessible. In addition, you also may find it useful to attend a low vision examination with your partner. Use it as an opportunity to ask questions and learn more.

What is a Low Vision Examination?

An eye examination conducted by a specially trained low vision specialist is usually the first step in the vision rehabilitation process. Special charts are used to determine how well individuals can see up close and at a distance, as well as how well they are able to distinguish objects from their background (contrast sensitivity). The specialist also will want to know how vision loss is affecting everyday activities. Optical devices, such as high-powered magnifiers and telescopes, often are prescribed — and instruction in their use is provided — to help people maximize any remaining vision.

Enhancing Communication

Communication can be a challenge for any couple. However, when one partner is visually impaired, there are additional sensitivities that come into play. Many couples admit that talking openly about mutual frustrations, and how vision loss has affected them, is not always easy.

What gets in the way of talking freely? Couples share the following concerns:

- Difficulty expressing anger and frustration out of fear of hurting the other's feelings
- Hesitancy to say anything that will be taken as criticism
- Discomfort with putting one's own needs first
- Guilt about having, admitting or expressing negative feelings

"We were very, very close before, but we are probably even closer now."

People in relationships often keep frustrations to themselves because they don't want to make each other feel badly. For example, your partner may accept unwanted assistance to be polite. On the other hand, you may clean up a spill yourself rather than point it out. But these unexpressed feelings can build up over time and get in the way of your relationship. As one person shared, "When I feel worn out, I start getting angry at my wife's requests but I don't want to show that I'm angry. I don't even like to recognize it in myself. It feels selfish. But unless I can feel good about myself, I really can't be caring of her, so I kind of own up to my feelings. It's hard."

Some couples point out the benefits of venting feelings on both sides and moving on. Others find that the best way to ensure that the partner with vision loss does not feel like the object of sympathy is to be open enough to argue. **Talking candidly about how vision loss affects your lives also can bring you closer together.** One partner commented, "We were very, very close before, but we are probably even closer now." Even if you haven't routinely shared concerns or feelings with one another in the past, there's no reason why you can't start now. One man summed it up well: "The frustrations — it's good to get them out. We talk to each other about it. It doesn't change things, but you do feel better."

Tips from Couples Like You

- Positive communication often requires some preparation. Think about how you feel, what you need or how you'd like things done.
- Focusing on your own feelings is less likely to put the other person on the defensive. For example, say: "I feel upset about ..." or "I would appreciate help with ..." rather than: "You made me feel ..." or "You could have done ..."
- Being specific about what you want is less likely to cause a negative reaction. Ask your partner to be specific about what kind of help is needed, and you should do the same.
- Acknowledge what you heard to assure your partner that you're really listening.
- Give your partner your full attention to prevent missing important points. Conversely, ask the other person to tell you what he/she heard to avoid misunderstandings.
- Postpone conversations when emotions are high. Wait for a time when both of you are calmer.
- Taking time to better understand each other's situation is likely to create more empathy. As hard as it may be, try to put yourself in your partner's shoes.

Additional Factors to Keep in Mind

Nonverbal expressions often are so automatic that it's easy to forget that you're even using them. Try to remember that the usual gestures, nods, smiles or frowns may not be visible to your partner. One woman shared a useful tip: "I call out my husband's name to get his attention. Since he can't see that I'm looking at him, he doesn't know when I'm talking to him."

"There's always a price for keeping things in. You know if your partner has had it — you somehow get the message — so there's communication without actually communicating. Sometimes, it's better just to say it and get it out in the open."

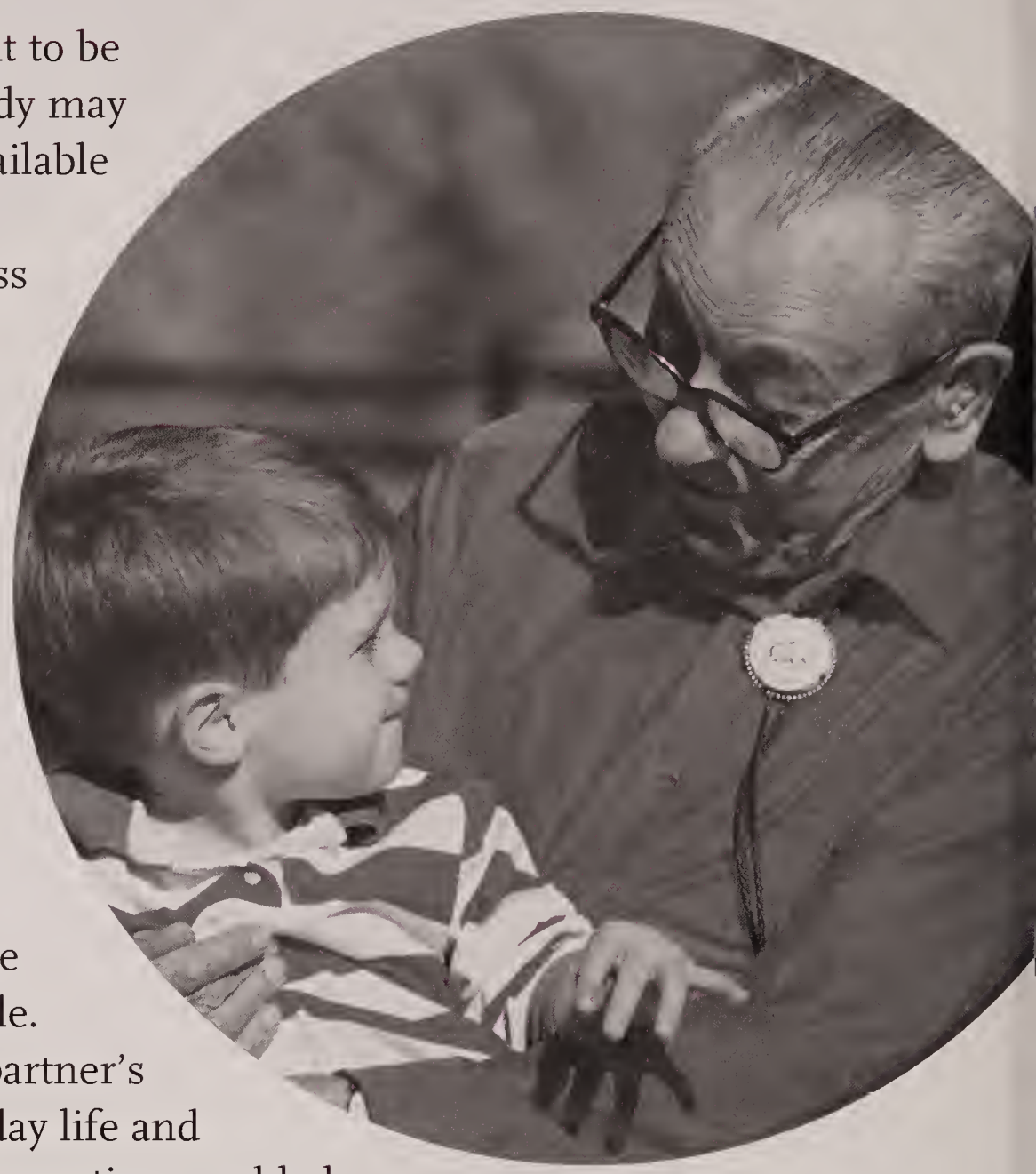
Similarly, your partner may pay closer attention than ever before to your touch, as well as to the tone and volume of your voice — all of which can convey unspoken feelings. One woman was surprised that her husband knew she was angry by the stiffness of her arm when they walked together.

Most likely, you will have to communicate verbally much more often than before, and what you say will need to be more specific. For example, placing a vase of flowers on a table without saying anything can lead to an unexpected mishap. And telling your partner that "the orange juice is over there" will likely result in a response like, "Where is 'there?'"

You may feel that you're being interrupted constantly, until you recognize that your partner simply can't tell that you're in the middle of doing something. By communicating more, these situations may be avoided. After many years of experience, one man suggested: "I communicate everything that I do so that my wife is not left wondering what I'm doing or where I am. If you can get started early with that constant communication, it sure helps."

The Lighthouse National Survey on Vision Loss revealed that 23% of respondents who are not visually impaired feel "awkward or embarrassed" because they do not know how to behave with people who have impaired vision. This feeling is even more common among people who report that they have a close family member who is visually impaired (32%).

Relationships with Family and Friends



Family members and friends want to be supportive and helpful. You already may have found that help is readily available from your children and/or other relatives. In some cases, vision loss brings families closer together. However, many people have never known anyone who is visually impaired, and they may feel uncomfortable about how to interact and awkward about offering help.

Some relatives may be happy to help, but they don't know how. Other family members may have difficulty understanding that some vision problems are not correctable. Sharing information about your partner's vision status, how it affects everyday life and some helpful tips may encourage questions and help everyone feel more at ease (see "Educating Yourself and Others" on page 11).

One of the hardest things to do is ask family members or friends for help when you need it. It's understandable that you don't want to burden anyone — even though you could really use the support. You may feel reluctant to involve other people because your partner doesn't want others involved — he/she may fear being pitied or may prefer to keep the situation private. This obviously makes it difficult for you to get assistance or emotional support when you may need it the most. Talking with your partner about the help you need may make him/her feel more comfortable about receiving assistance. And finding ways to return favors can make you both feel more giving.

The Impact on Your Lifestyle

Couples in situations like yours sometimes need to find new ways to maintain their social lives. Some found that their partners were not particularly comfortable eating out in restaurants, and others began to entertain more frequently since their spouses were more secure in their own surroundings. Couples also gained new friends in their support groups.

Socializing with others in similar circumstances can be very beneficial for both of you, as it allows you to observe how others are dealing with everyday activities and social situations. If a support group is not available in your area, consult your local vision rehabilitation agency for help with contacting other couples dealing with vision loss. You even may consider starting your own support group. Connecting with others by phone or E-mail also can help reduce isolation and provide emotional support. Call **(800) 829-0500** to obtain a copy of **Programs for Partners of People with Impaired Vision: A Discussion Guide for Support Group Leaders**.

Educating Yourself and Others

Below are suggestions from people who are visually impaired:

- Let me know when you enter or leave a room.
- If you address me by my name, I will know that you are talking to me.
- If other people ask you what I want, let me respond, so they realize that they can talk to me directly.
- When you think I need help, ask me first. If help is requested, I can usually tell you what I need or how we can do it together.
- Let me do as much as I can, even if it takes me longer or if I do it differently than you would.
- When providing directions, try to be as specific as possible. Instead of saying, "It's over there," try: "The tape recorder is in the middle of your dresser."
- You can use terms like "visually impaired" or "blind," as well as conversational language like "look" and "see."
- If you want to shake my hand, tell me so that I can respond to your gesture.

Dealing with your partner's vision loss often can impact your individual social life. As one woman commented, "I used to have a more independent life; now I spend most of my time with my husband, and I don't socialize much with friends." During support group meetings, sighted partners encouraged each other to maintain friendships, and to continue hobbies, exercise regimens and community involvement. And you can stay in constant touch with your partner by using cell phones, pagers or walkie-talkies.

Even if your partner encourages you to continue your usual personal activities, you still may feel reluctant to do so. It's difficult to know if your concerns about leaving your partner alone are realistic or if you're simply being overly protective. One woman, hesitant to leave her husband to take an overnight trip, found that he enjoyed staying by himself; it gave him a feeling of independence. You may feel more comfortable pursuing your interests if your partner also tries to reestablish his/her own hobbies and friendships. It appears that when both of you are involved in purposeful activities, there is a greater sense of balance in the relationship.

"We have a very full life."

Many couples find new activities that can be enjoyed together: going to the gym, taking walks, doing crossword puzzles, dancing, and attending shows and concerts. Some continue to travel — going on cruises, beach vacations or family visits. One woman shared, "We have a very full life."

Dealing with Issues of Dependence and Independence

"When my husband succeeds, he is just elated, and it makes me feel good, too."

It's normal for you to struggle over when to offer assistance, how much to help and when to encourage your partner to do things alone. It can be very difficult to hold back as you watch someone undertake a task that was so much easier and quicker to accomplish with full sight. However, providing unneeded assistance, or taking over in order to complete a task, can come at an enormous price — feelings of uselessness and excessive dependency for your partner, and added burdens for you.

While there are no simple answers about when, or how much, to help, it's much easier when couples talk openly about this issue. There may be certain things that your partner wants to do on his/her own, and other tasks that you can do together. There also may be activities that you'd like to see your partner continue but you're not sure they're possible. **Unfortunately, many people mistakenly assume that people who are visually impaired have to give up many routine tasks or favorite activities.** Certified rehabilitation teachers can provide necessary information, encouragement about what is possible and training in new ways to perform everyday activities. Most activities can be adapted, and special equipment and computers may be utilized to continue favorite interests safely and successfully. To find vision rehabilitation agencies in your area, call **(800) 829-0500**.

People who are new to vision loss may not be ready to take advantage of these services, or they may need encouragement. Participating in a support group and meeting others who are visually impaired can sometimes help people take this step. Or, as your partner adjusts, you may want to revisit every now and then a discussion about vision rehabilitation services. Even when people receive these services, they often can benefit from additional training, especially if their vision changes or they discover new activities to pursue.

Many of the sighted partners in our support group programs told us that their spouses don't like feeling dependent on others and strive to be as self-sufficient as possible. One person put it well: "Dependency really robs people of self-esteem. The more they learn, the happier they'll be and the happier we'll be. And that's what I'm striving for." Many also talk proudly about their partners' participation in a variety of household responsibilities. As one woman said, "When my husband succeeds, he is just elated, and it makes me feel good, too."

However, it can be frustrating when your partner won't accept help, even when it appears to be needed. It's difficult to watch your partner's frustration when struggling with a task. Rather than immediately offering to handle it, one man learned to ask, "Is there a way for me to help you to do this?" Another husband commented, "I have to restrain myself because when she wants to do something, she says, 'I have to do it,' and I don't want to interfere with that." While you may get impatient when things take longer to get accomplished, try to recognize when it's better to "back off."

An important consideration is the balance of giving and receiving in the relationship. Although not always acknowledged, receiving is much harder than giving. (Lustbader, 1995). While responsibilities may shift, it's important for your partner to feel that he/she is contributing to daily activities — and to the relationship.

Frustration also may arise if your partner settles into a pattern of allowing others to do everything for him/her. How can you motivate your partner to do the reasonable tasks independently? And are these expectations realistic? Working together may be a good first step. One woman shared how she sets things up so that her husband can use the microwave or washing machine on his own. Another cleans up a messy kitchen after her husband prepares lunch for himself. Using this gradual process, success can build on itself. If you're not always doing everything, your partner may find ways to accomplish tasks alone.

Couples Share Tips

- If your partner with impaired vision says, "I can do it," let him/her do it!
- Your partner should tell you what type of help is needed, and when.
- Take time to discuss who should do what, and how to work as a team.

As always, communication between partners is key — about when to give help and what specific help is needed. As one woman noted, "You can try to anticipate a need, but it's got to be their job to ask for help. And it's our job to give that help as best we can."

You sometimes may feel reluctant to involve your partner in decisions or other issues, and this can strain the relationship. Allowing your partner to stay involved is very important. One woman emphasized how helpful it was to have her husband's emotional support when she visited the dentist: "Just because he can't see, he can still feel; he can understand."

Getting Around Safely

It's understandable for you to fear for your partner's safety while getting around at home or outdoors — particularly if he/she hasn't been exposed to the knowledge, skills and techniques (acquired through vision rehabilitation) that enable people with vision loss to travel safely and independently.

Getting information about safe travel methods can reduce fears and clarify misconceptions. There are several mobility techniques that people with impaired vision can learn. These include how to use: their remaining vision (and other senses); another person; a white cane or a dog guide. Certified orientation and mobility specialists help determine the most appropriate method(s) based on the individual's vision status, goals and preferences. Even if your partner does not want to travel independently, a mobility specialist can offer suggestions for safe movement at home, as well as provide sighted guide training to help you feel more at ease when traveling together.

Many people with vision loss have a difficult time accepting a white cane, as it visibly identifies them as being visually impaired. They may not want others to know, or they may feel vulnerable, embarrassed or concerned that people will pity them. Your attitude can affect your partner's decision to use — or not use — a white cane, so it's important to educate yourself about its many benefits. Contact your local vision rehabilitation agency to talk with people who have learned to be independent travelers, and hear firsthand about their experiences and successes.

You also can ease your personal concerns by participating in, or observing, your partner's mobility training session (get permission to do this first). This opportunity will allow you to ask questions and observe mobility techniques and strategies. As one sighted partner noted, "It helps to be shown how mobility instruction works. It's important to get the

hands-on experience." For example, you'll get a better understanding of the types of information a white cane gives its user, such as the widths and depths of steps or curbs. White canes also enable a user to identify textures, and to discover objects or holes in one's path. This experience also can demonstrate how proper cane use increases safety, stability and control. Armed with this knowledge, you can feel more comfortable encouraging the use of a cane.

"It helps to be shown how mobility instruction works. It's important to get the hands-on experience."

Even if you both prefer using a sighted guide technique, the cane can increase your partner's feelings of safety and reduce the burden on you. As one cane user shared, "I just think it's fair to try and do what I can, and not to put all the pressure on him to have to watch everything."

Using a Sighted Guide

With the sighted guide technique, the person with impaired vision holds a guide's arm just above the elbow. The guide walks one-half step ahead and communicates when nearing curbs, steps or other obstacles. For example, "We're approaching a staircase that is going up." Or, "We are coming to a door, which will open on your left."

The guide must pay special attention in spaces like doorways, to ensure that the path is wide enough to accommodate both people. There are special methods for handling different situations such as narrow passages, getting into a car or taking a seat. For details, call **(800) 829-0500** to order **Take Charge of Your Life with Vision Rehabilitation** (see page 22).

Organizing Your Home for Accessibility, Safety and Comfort

Ensuring safety and comfort at home is another common issue for partners. In most cases, simple changes often can make a big difference. Lighting, contrast and organization are usually at the top of the list.

Control natural and artificial light through adjustable window shades, flexible-armed lamps, or positioning of television and computer screens to avoid glare. Lighting needs and preferences vary depending on your partner's vision condition, and a low vision specialist can provide useful tips about meeting lighting needs. Experiment to see which solutions work best.

Contrast and marking systems can make seeing objects easier. Consider using lightly colored plates on dark place mats, and brightly colored towels that contrast with walls. Mark the most frequently used settings on appliances, such as dishwashers and microwaves.

Organization becomes very important. Couples usually find that working out a system together can avoid frustrations about finding things when they're needed. Putting things back where they belong benefits everyone. Note the following tips:

- Push chairs under tables and keep cupboard/closet doors either completely open or closed — not ajar. Keep pathways clear, too.
- Communicate any environmental changes, from rearranging furniture to opening the oven door.
- Consider putting a coffee table on a different floor surface like an area rug so that you can feel the difference as you near the table.
- Throw rugs should have non-skid rubber backing or double-sided tape.
- Increase visibility of steps, especially the top and bottom steps, by using tread strips or safety tape on the edges.
- Install a handrail or banister for stairways.

For more comprehensive strategies and tips, call **(800) 829-0500** to order **Take Charge of Your Life with Vision Rehabilitation**.

Dealing with Stress

Coping with vision loss, the changes in responsibilities and shifts in dependency all cause additional stress. As one wife shared, "We're doing for two, not for one, and that's the difference. When we leave the house, I have to help him or get his stuff — I can't just think of myself."

"Last night was the first time I asked him if he would mind dusting, and he said 'of course not.' He found the cloth, he dusted and the furniture was shining."

You may find yourself taking on tasks that used to seem gender specific. In our sighted partner support groups, men reported cooking and handling the shopping, while women were doing more driving and taking on financial activities. Women were particularly concerned about, and sensitive to, their partners' sense of manhood. They don't want them to feel incapable or dependent, and they're careful not to remind them about the changes that have occurred. **While it's good to consider your partner's feelings, this, too, can escalate stress.** For example, one woman now has to unload the car and bring packages into the house. Holding back her frustration about taking on this new task causes stress to build.

Despite the fact that your partner can contribute to many everyday chores, you may feel uncomfortable asking for help with tasks that he/she may not have done before. Yet this is a practical way to ease your burdens. After feeling overwhelmed with too much to do, one woman admitted, "Last night was the first time I asked him if he would mind dusting, and he said 'of course not.' He found the cloth, he dusted and the furniture was shining."

Stress also may arise as you become more involved with each other's daily activities. Spending more time together can exaggerate differences, and the changes in dependency can magnify issues. As one partner commented, "If we had a disagreement before, she was able to go and do what she wanted to do. Now, if she wants to do something and I don't want to do it, I have to because she can't do it without me."

Stress can exhibit itself in a number of ways, including: headaches, exhaustion, trouble sleeping, eating more or less, feeling angry or short-tempered, a lack of energy, being forgetful, feeling sad, depressed or guilty, or just not being able to enjoy things. While there are no right or wrong ways to manage stress, some ways are healthier than others. People may not always be able to control the cause of stress, but they can change how they deal with it.

Give Yourself a Break!

Relieve stress by finding an activity you enjoy. Listen to music, do yoga, plant flowers, play with a pet, read books, walk, run, ride a bike, pray, dance, call a friend, do crossword puzzles, write or find humor.

During partner discussion group meetings focusing on stress, participants shared ideas and discovered new options:

- Use simple deep breathing — in through the nose and out through the mouth ("smell a rose and blow out a candle") — which can be done alone at any time or place.
- Think of something that brings you joy — a moment, special person, place, time or treasured object — to put a smile on your face and change your frame of mind.
- Combat negative self-talk like, "I should have done ..." or "Why didn't I think of ..." with positive thoughts. In one of our support group activities, participants assigned a positive personal attribute to each letter of their first names, as a way to think and feel good about themselves (Strand, 1995). Members also noted the positive qualities they saw in each other. As one man commented, "Connecting myself to my positive qualities is not something that I do often. It felt really good. And I'd like to do it with my wife."
- Share humorous experiences related to vision loss. One favorite: A woman with a dog guide heard someone say, "Look! There's a blind dog!" She responded, "My dog is sighted. I'm the one who's visually impaired." Having a good laugh can change your mood and relieve stress at the same time.

Final Thoughts ...

While vision loss undoubtedly changes your life, with time, many couples find ways to adapt positively to the situation. **The feelings and issues described in this booklet are meant to serve as a starting point.** We hope that the experiences of other sighted partners have given you a better understanding of the emotional changes you may be going through, as well as practical information about services and resources that are available for both you and your partner.

Although many sighted partners may not identify themselves as "caregivers," the issues you face are similar to those who are caring for partners with other chronic conditions. It can be reassuring to know that others have similar feelings and, for one man, being in a group with other sighted partners had an added benefit. It made him realize that his problems are not specific to him, but "characteristic of caregiver problems. It changes your perspective in a very helpful way."

Find out about partner support groups in your community. If none exists, consider starting one. **Programs for Partners of People with Impaired Vision: A Discussion Guide for Support Group Leaders**, a free publication, is available to assist both peer and professional leaders in developing a program. And if your partner has not received vision rehabilitation, we strongly encourage you to find out about these services, which can make a profound difference in the quality of his/her life — and in your life together. Your partner also may want to consider joining a support group with others who are coping with vision loss, to decrease isolation, make friends, share concerns and find solutions to everyday issues.

Getting More Information

To find out about vision rehabilitation services, low vision centers, support groups and caregiver resources in your state, or to find out about publications or vision simulator glasses, call the Lighthouse Information & Resource Service toll free at **(800) 829-0500** or send an E-mail to **info@lighthouse.org**. An information specialist will talk with you and provide resources to meet your needs.

You also can visit Lighthouse International's website, **www.lighthouse.org**, to view and/or order recent newsletters, research papers, books, brochures and fact sheets.

Call for a free copy of **Programs for Partners of People with Impaired Vision: A Discussion Guide for Support Group Leaders**, and select from an array of helpful fact sheets, including:

- Helping Family and Friends Understand Vision Loss
- Making Your Home More Comfortable, Convenient and Accessible
- Braving the Low Vision Exam
- Illuminating Solutions
- Mark My Words
- Fix It Yourself
- Looking on the Lighter Side
- Taking Time Out
- Laugh When You Can
- Canes Provide Information for Independence

And for details about the benefits of vision rehabilitation services, we also offer a book entitled **Take Charge of Your Life with Vision Rehabilitation**.

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We appreciate the contributions of all the members of the Program for Partners project team:

Marjorie Cantor, MA,
Professor and Brookdale Distinguished Scholar, Graduate School of Social Service, Fordham University

Verena R. Cimarolli, PhD,
Lighthouse International

Caryn R. Goodman, PhD,
Lighthouse International

Amy Horowitz, DSW,
Lighthouse International

Linda Schulz, CSW,
Lighthouse International

Cydney Strand, RN,
Lighthouse International

Cynthia Stuen, DSW,
Lighthouse International

Markita Vogt, AA,
Alliance for Disabled in Action, Inc.

Shazia Zaman, MA,
Graduate Student,
Montclair State University

Carol J. Sussman-Skalka, CSW, MBA,
Project Director, Program for Partners

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Lighthouse International is a leading resource worldwide on vision impairment and vision rehabilitation. Through its pioneering work in vision rehabilitation services, education, research, prevention and advocacy, Lighthouse International enables people of all ages who are blind or partially sighted to lead independent and productive lives. Founded in 1905 and headquartered in New York, Lighthouse International is a not-for-profit organization, and depends on the support and generosity of individuals, foundations and corporations.

Lighthouse International
111 East 59th Street
New York, NY 10022-1202
Tel (212) 821-9200
(800) 829-0500 (toll free)
Fax (212) 821-9707
TTY (212) 821-9713
www.lighthouse.org

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